EPA sees 'secondhand' smoke risks

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WASHINGTON

The Environmental Protection Agency will conclude officially tomorrow that exposure to "secondhand" cigarette smoke causes lung cancer in adults and greatly increases the risk of respiratory illnesses in children.

EPA administrator William K. Reilly's endorsement of a report by a panel of scientific advisors to the agency will end a contentious two-year review of the issue. The panel's evidence and conclusions have been denounced repeatedly by the tobacco industry.

The EPA's endorsement of the scientific panel's findings will have no immediate practical impact, because the agency has no authority to regulate indoor air pollution. But the move could have a significant influence on how local governments and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) adopt and enforce workplace anti-smoking rules.

OSHA is soliciting information on indoor air quality, a process that could lead to new federal rules on air pollution in the workplace.

The EPA's scientific advisory panel finished its review of the subject in late October, approving a report which concludes that environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) is a "Class A" human carcinogen — a group that includes a handful of substances including asbestos, arsenic and benzene. ETS annually causes the lung cancer deaths of approximately 3,000 U.S. adults, the panel estimated.

The report also blames secondhand smoke for hundreds of thousands of cases of childhood respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis and pneumonia and for increasing the severity of asthma attacks in children.

Public health advocates hailed the news that EPA would take the final step in endorsing the scientific panel's conclusions.

"This really puts the EPA imprimatur on something the public has known for a long time — that is, that secondhand smoke is dangerous, that tobacco smoke, whether inhaled from one's own cigarette or someone else's cigarette, is basically the same product," said Alfred Munzer, a Washington-area lung specialist who is the incoming president of the American Lung Association.

The report was the focus of a massive lobbying campaign by the tobacco industry and its allies in Congress. They submitted hundreds of pages of documents to the EPA in the past two years in an effort to delay or water down the report.

Brennan Dawson, a spokeswoman for the Tobacco Institute, said that despite the report's revisions, its conclusions were still not supported by existing scientific data.

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PAGE 11 OF ___

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